

Abandoning Troy for Cats and Angels

*Four Poems by Lucio Zinna translated
by Barbara Carle*

Barbara Carle holds a Ph.D from Columbia University in Italian language and literature. She is poet, translator, and critic. Her *Don't Waste My Beauty/Non guastare la mia bellezza* (Caramanica, 2006) won the Premio Frascati, Foreign Section, "Italo Alighiero Chiusano," 2000. This book was translated into Italian by the author and Antonella Anedda. Her *New Life/Vita nuova* (2006) was brought out by Gradiva Publications in New York. She translated *Altre contingenze/Other contingencies* by Rodolfo Di Biasio, (Caramanica/Gradiva, 2002). She has written numerous articles on contemporary Italian poetry and on comparative literature. She has translated many contemporary poets. Her most recent book of poetry in English and Italian is titled *Tangible Remains/Toccare quello che resta*, Ghenomena Edizioni, 2009.

Lucio Zinna was born near Trapani (Mazara del Vallo) in 1938. At twenty years old he moved to Palermo where he obtained his university degree in philosophy and pedagogy. He has remained in the area (Bagheria) alternating his various professional activities which consist of teaching with writing poetry, literary and artistic criticism, and editing a journal, *Arenaria*. Zinna has over 14 volumes of poetry in print from *Al chiarore del alba*, 1954 to the recent *Poesie a mezz'aria*, 2009. He has published three books of criticism and translated Paul Valéry's *Cimetière marin*. His poems have been included in various anthologies, for example, *Tre generazioni di poeti italiani*, edited by Giuliano Manacorda and Francesco De Nicola, 2005.

Most critics agree that the distinguishing element of Zinna's poetry is linguistic exploration, *ricerca linguistica* which translates into what is known in Italian as *pastiche*, that is, a vividly mixed lexicon. In Zinna's case it means that words from various linguistic registers (high and low), Greek and Latin, French, English, and Sicilian, technological terms, etc. are masterfully combined into a distinct style of Dantesque origin. Irony, humor, and pathos are also

characteristic traits of Lucio Zinna's work.

I have translated four poems with the hope that they will provide an in depth view into the world of this unique writer, who is practically unknown to English speakers. The first two come from *Abbandonare Troia*, 1986: *Sudità* and *A volte qualcuno rimane*. The third poem comes from *La porcellana più fine*, 2001: *Compianto per il gatto Raf*, and the last, *Per un transito alare* from his most recent book, *Poesie a mezz'aria*, 2009.

The title of the first piece, *Southness* or *Sudità* is a neologism by Zinna. This poem is an exercise in irony. On the one hand Sicilians have suffered discrimination because they are Southerners just as many Africans have suffered because of the color of their skin. But the fact that this has happened in the past or even in the present does not mean it must condition the future. Zinna rejects determinism and the culture of victimization, when he writes, *basta coi lamenti/ enough complaining* and by refusing to "eternally cry" the not very original "sin" of accepting the heritage of "South-ness": *Chi disse si debba eternamente piangere il peccato/ (così scarsamente) originale di questa oltranzosa/ sud-ità irremovibile sudditanza implume vecchissima/ insularità da viverci sulla pelle come nigrizia. (Who said that we must eternally cry the original/(not at all) sin of this excessive/immovable south-ness subjection unfledged too old/ insularity to be lived like a state of nigrizia.)*

After pointing out that evil and mafias are not the exclusive property of Sicilians and that they exist everywhere, the poet, with an increasingly playful tone, goes on to question the notion of identity based on geographical origin and the ideology which derives from it. We observe the use of Latin words and phrases, *nigrizia*, (nerezza, blackness) *particula mundi*, (particle of the universe) Sicilian, *fillata*, (sliced prosciutto) words of Greek origin, *endo*, and other terms from Venetian dialect such as *osei*, (uccelli). We also find intertextual citations from Lorenzo il Magnifico's *Trionfo di Bacco e Arianna* (*Ciò c'ha esser, convien sia/ Chi vuol esser lieto sia:/ di doman non c'è certezza*) and Dante's *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIV (*I' mi son un che, quando/ Amor mi spira*).

The second poem compares the poet to a drug addict in a pseudo confessional tone playfully maintained throughout this autobiographical monologue with New Testament echoes from the *Gospel According to John*. This poem is also a sort of accelerated course in the history of Italian poetry; we learn that the poet has experi-

enced all the styles from *terzarima* to *versi sciolti* to the Futurist *parolibere*. Here too we find a mixed lexicon with words from English, *overdose*, and slang, *bucarsi* (shoot up) as well as neologisms such as *tossicopoesiomanì* (junkypoetrymaniacs). Zinna reaffirms his poetics of *pastiche* when he writes *M'affratello ai clandestini della parola* (*I fraternize with aliens of the word*). Put differently, there are few lexical fields he excludes from his poetry, nor would foreign words be rejected simply because of their origin.

The third poem is a dirge for a departed cat and it admirably balances pathos and humor concluding with a slightly profane plea for animal rights in paradise. This piece is quite moving and consists of an in depth portrait of a beloved feline companion and his remarkable communicative skills, the saga of his death and his silent purring, and a final prayer to a perhaps absent God (“accogli/ nel tuo regno [...] se davvero esiste da qualche parte”/ “Receive/ into your realm [...] if it really exists somewhere”).

If Zinna has doubts about the divine they do not apply to angels as the fourth poem clearly shows. It characteristically fuses the qualities already considered but reveals fresh lyricism, a subtlety and smoothness in its transitions and tone. This finesse is fitting since the title is, after all, *Per un transito alare*. Zinna’s recent writing is a sensual and sensory composition on the ineffable. This ironic feat is a *tour de force* of craftsmanship and a true delight for the reader.

da: *Abbandonare Troia*, 1986

Sudità

Chi disse si debba eternamente piangere il peccato
(così scarsamente) originale di questa oltranzosa
sud-ità irremovibile sudditanza implume vecchissima
insularità da viverci sulla pelle come nigritia.
Chi vuol esser geronimo sia. Fattori endo/esogeni
a sé stanti non reggono resta questo bipede prodotto
composito complesso sulla base delle proprie basi
ognuno è quel che diviene. Più non è tempo d'auto-
commiserazioni semmai di segnare altro lamento
(che basta coi lamenti) che ha d'esser convenien sia.

Esistono *le* mafie ed *i* fascismi e sono planetari
e sono mascherati esistono ascari e colonizzatori
ogni speculatore ha portamento signorile la calma
è la virtù dei provocatori. Siamo un (generoso) popolo
di oppressi ed oppressori siccome in ogni particula
mundi ci coglie sino qui il montaliano male di vivere.

Per quanto mi concerne - Marina - 'I mi son un che quando
il sole picchia ne riceve fastidio e non s'abitu
che avverte nostalgia di Parigi e Venezia Ostenda e Borgo
Taro che aggrada nebbie e camini e pasta alla norma
e polenta con osei (cascavallo e parmigiano fillata
e sandaniele) resto imbevuto di continentale letteraria
cultura secondo l'aspetto climatico-geografico mi configuro
uomo del nord (Sicilia mio nordafrica) né mi cale se tu -
così soavemente lombarda - sia donna del sud (del sudeuropa
[intendo]).

A volte qualcuno rimane

Di poesia mi reputo un antico drogato

(Iniziai per solitudine a quattordici anni
con spinelli in terzarima a sedici mi bucavo
versisciolti più tardi m'iniettai - quel tanto -

Southness

Who said that we must eternally cry the original
(not at all) sin of this excessive
immovable *south*-ness subjection unfledged too old
insularity to be lived like a state of *nigritia*.
May whoever wishes be geronimo. Endo/exogenous factors
alone don't stand this bipedal product remains
composite complex based upon its own foundations
each one is what they become. It's no longer time for self
pity instead another complaint must be marked
(that is, enough complaining) what needs to be is fitting.

Mafias and Fascism exist and are planetary
and they wear masks native soldiers and colonizers exist
every speculator has a respectable demeanor calm
is the strength of agitators. We are a (generous) people
of oppressed and oppressors since in each *particula
mundi* even here the Montalian angst seizes us.

As far as I am concerned- Marina - I am one who when the sun taps is discomforted and doesn't adapt who feels nostalgia for Paris and Venice Ostend and Borgo Taro who enjoys fog and fireplaces and *pasta alla norma* and hunter's polenta (caciocavallo and parmesan our local prosciutto and the San Daniele brand) I remain imbued with [continental literary culture according to the geographic-climactic aspect I [imagine myself a man of the North (Sicily my North Africa) nor does [it matter if you - so soavely Lombard - are woman of the South (from Southern [Europe I mean).

Sometimes One Ends Up

Of poetry I consider myself a long time addict

(I began in solitude at fourteen years old
with joints in terzarima at sixteen I was shooting up

parolibere in esperienze neoformaliste)

Da tempo mi coltivo (solitario) la roba
non soffro crisi d'astinenza evito cauto
l'overdose

M'affratello ai clandestini della parola
ai tossicopoesiomaniani ai liricodipendenti

agli indifesi in più plaghe temuti dal potere
mentalmente perquisiti destinati a campi
di deconcentrazione

È canapa indiana la parola e cresce
in terra di libertà parola trasmutata
risignificata - vena musica fionda - era
in principio

sarà anche alla fine

(A volte qualcuno rimane accartocciato
in un angolo accanto a versisiringa a volte
poeti si muore)

From: *La porcellana più fine*, 2001

Compianto per il gatto Raf

Mi narro ogni volta con amaro struggimento
(i francesi direbbero *peine* o *amertume*) tue
gesta e sublimi esempi di lealtà felina la tua
capacità di dilatare l'arco di 15 richiami
e 25 vocalizzazioni concesso alla tua specie
e celebri nostri distesi colloqui e sguardi
in cui mi leggevi l'umore a calibrare strusci
e tenerezze puro maestro di cerimonie
confessore involontario e signore di gratitudini.

Un velo di commozione franse la scorza
professionale dell'assistente nell'ambulatorio
veterinario quando - nella settimana triste
di passione - captò nei polpastrelli le tue
sfinite ormai silenziose il tuo "grazie"

blank verse later I injected myself - just enough -
free words in neoformalist experiments)

For a while now I've grown (solitary) my own stuff
I don't suffer withdrawal symptoms cautious I avoid
overdoses

I fraternize with aliens of the word
with junkypoetrymaniacs with lyricaddicts

with the defenseless in more districts feared by power
mentally searched destined for camps
of deconcentration

The word is Indian cannabis and grows
in lands of freedom transformed word
redefined - vein music sling - it was
in the beginning

and will be in the end

(At times someone ends up crumpled
in a corner next to syringeverses at times
one dies a poet)

Dirge for my Cat Raf

Each time I narrate to myself with bitter anguish
(the French would say *peine* or *amertume*) your
exploits and sublime examples of feline loyalty your
capacity of dilating the span of the 15 cries
and 25 vocalizations conceded to your species
and I celebrate our drawn out dialogues and looks
with which you read my moods calibrating tenderness
rubs against me pure master of ceremonies
involuntary confessor and lord of gratitudes.

A veil of emotion shattered the professional
exterior of the veterinary clinic assistant
when - in the sad week
of passion - with his fingertips he intercepted your
then finished silent purring your "thank you"
for the intravenous drip that tried to assuage

per la flebo che tentava di lenire l'arsura
indomabile dell'azotemia. Spirasti quella sera
e ti piansi come il fratello che non ebbi.
Che temeva la morte per essere così violenta
con un piccolo indifeso come te?

Un essere mite come il gatto Raffaele accogli
nel tuo regno (di cui sono immeritevole) -
se davvero esiste da qualche parte - tu che riesci
ad essere (dicono) anche "Dio degli eserciti".
Non puoi affiggere il cartello bicolore VIETATO
AGLI ANIMALI come all'ingresso di un supermarket.
E che me ne farei - Signore - di un paradiso senza gatti?

da: *Poesie a mezz'aria*, 2009

Per un transito alare

Gli angeli navigano oceani siderei
in leghe d'azzurlo e silenti approdano
in punta d'ala a in/sondabili porti
poi per singole (e singolari) destinazioni
si diramano in briosi fruscii.

Passano impalpabili a sguardi e lasciano
segni leggibili con alfabeti dell'*intus*
e lunette d'anima. Con un soffio
orientano dardi impossibili per nostri
benèfici bersagli non lasciano captare
musicali frulli variopinte fragranze
(un sussurro risolutivo un insperato
sostegno un impercettibile clic
in circuiti mentali ne rivela il transito).

Può darsi che a missione compiuta
qualcuno di essi ti sieda accanto
in minuscola sosta e ancora un po'
ti guardi vivere poi con confidenziale
sorriso annuisca o scuota i castanochiari
capelli prima di tornarsene svolando
per un socchiuso abbaino.

the indomitable thirst of azotaemia. You expired that evening
and I wept for you like the brother I never had.
What did death fear with its violence
against a small defenseless one as you?

Receive a gentle being like the cat Raffaele
in your realm (of which I am unworthy) -
if it really exists somewhere - you who can
be (they say) also "God of armies."
You can't put up a bicolored sign saying: ANIMALS
KEEP OUT like a supermarket entrance.
What do you want me to do - Lord - in a paradise without
[cats?

For A Winged Passage

Angels navigate sidereal oceans
in azure leagues and silently land
on the tip of their wings in un/fathomable ports
then they branch out with bright shuffles
for single (and singular) destinations.

They pass impalpable to looks and leave
legible signs with alphabets from the *intus*
and lunettes of the soul. With a puff
they orient impossible darts for our
beneficial marks don't let musical
flutters iridescent fragrances be perceived
(a conclusive whisper un hoped for
support an imperceptible clic
in our mental circuits reveals their passage).

Perhaps once their mission is accomplished
one of them sits next to you
in a minuscule pause and again for a bit
watches you live then with a cozy
smile nods or shakes its light chestnut
colored hair before it returns flying
through a half open skylight.